What's Wrong With America & "Big Business"?

IDA M. TARBELL Answers Both Questions

Federal Control Will Right the Wrong That Have Sprung From the Building Up of Huge Fortunes, Says Miss Tarbell—"Barbaric" Wealth Is Nearing Its End in the United States—"Nothing Is Just as It Ought to Be in America."

By MARY KATHERINE WOODS.

WE shall have no more Rockefellers, no more Carnegies. The gigantic fortunes of the present day are the relics of an uncivilized half-century. Within another century or two these barbaric millions shall have been distributed and America shall know their like no more.

This is the prediction of Ida M. Tarbell, muckraker and optimist; Ida M. Tarbell, merciless exposer of evils in our government and our commerce, who declares that nothing is quite right in America to-day, and who adds that the nation is waking up to better things.

"Nothing in America is quite as it should be," said Miss Tarbell. "We absolutely must have government control of Big Business. We absolutely must have the fair distribution of wealth. We are on the way toward Federal jurisdiction already. Colossal fortunes are not 'above the law.'"

And with the building up of government control of "trade," there topples to the ground the dizzy possibility of huge fortune-making.

"The immense pile of millions passes, I am convinced, with the passing of Rockefeller, Carnegie and their colleagues. They will not be duplicated."

Miss Tarbell, explaining in an interview her beliefs as to the future of America, the future of government and business and citizenship, made these statements very quietly and with entire sureness. She pointed out the wrongs of the day and suggested a remedy.

With more completeness probably than any other investigator in the country, Miss Tarbell has laid bare the weak places in our modern commercial life. There has been no more pitiless foe to "privilege" and to "protection" to all that makes for "predatory wealth." She has attacked, with no fear and with no quarter, trusts and the tariff, business dishonesty and government corruption, the suppression of competition and the restraint of trade. But she has not only torn down; she has told how to build up. And through all her work as an exposer of all kinds of "graft," she has kept her faith in the people of America, and, in spite of her conviction that "nothing is as it ought to be," her firm hope for a solution of present problems.

"Big fortunes must go," said Miss Tarbell.

"Nothing is quite right now.

"But we are working toward rightness.

"There are things that we must do. We absolutely must."

Miss Tarbell urges, not Federal ownership, but Federal jurisdiction.

"I am for saying that government jurisdiction over business will do away with all our evils," she added. "No one thing by itself will do it. There is too much that is awry. Such a [illegible] as the nation has on hand must be gradual, step by step.

"But Federal [illegible] is an important step. Federal control of interstate commerce and transportation has already made it impossible for such an aggregation as the Standard Oil ever to be duplicated."

B[illegible] achievement [illegible] Miss Tarbell had some [illegible] huge fortunes.

"These great fortunes of ours are barbaric," she declared.

"They are [illegible]. They grew up and [illegible] because we did not know what to do with the country's vast riches, and ignorantly allowed them to pass into the hands of a few men. Our immense fortunes are a mark of our ignorance and inexperience as a nation. We have them to worry us because we [illegible] have not known how to attend to our own business. We did not know what to do with our great country and riches.

"They grew up like mushrooms in the past fifty years. A comparatively few years ago there were scarcely ten millionaires in America. Now they are as thick as blackberries. There is no counting them. A man who has but a million dollars is comparatively poor.

"But in these past few years—oh, a very few years—we have begun to realize that these huge fortunes are bad things. They are bad for the country and they are bad for the millionaires. They are bad for the poor people and they are a nuisance for the men who make and manipulate them. They are not good things in any way.

"The very fact that this nation is coming to realize that is a hopeful sign for America.

"The next thing to do is to make the piling up of such fortunes impossible.

"That is exactly what we are doing now. Our great fortunes will be distributed, and they will not be duplicated. That is all over."

Miss Tarbell was asked what made the making of many millions an impossibility for the future, and she explained at once.

"Stripping off special privilege and government control," she answered. "Give the United States Government control of Big Business and you begin the distribution of wealth. You make the piling up of barbaric fortunes in the hands of one or a few men impossible.

"Our great fortunes have been made by the restraint of trade, by methods now known to be illegal.

"It would never have been possible for certain corporations to pile up colossal capital without control of transportation for their own ends. It would not have been possible without control of natural resources.

"Take the management of these things, the private manipulation of them, completely away from the hands of the corporations, the few, and place it in the Federal power, and you take away the beams of which our colossal fortunes are built.

"The problem of the distribution of wealth has never been solved in the history of the world. We are nearer a solution now than we have ever been."

When Miss Tarbell urges government control of "interstate commerce" she means all of Big Business. She includes all corporations, all railroads, all the management of natural resources and public service industries, all manufactories that do business over the borders of a State. She has no half-way measures to propose.

The control that she urges must be, she avers, active, detailed, immediate.

Three great steps have already been taken, Miss Tarbell points out, toward the achievement of Federal control.

"The Interstate Commerce Commission has attained the first possibilities of government jurisdiction over railroads.

"The Bureau of Commerce and Labor has enabled the government to investigate and keep closely in touch with the manipulation of big business activities.

"Prosecution of corporations has been carried on under the Sherman antitrust law, and a definition is being evolved, by a series of tests, of that vague phrase, 'restraint of trade.'

"The work of the Interstate Commerce Commission illustrates how we are working toward government control of large interests," she said. "It also illustrates the slowness with which we achieve things.

"It took us twenty years to get that Interstate Commerce Commission. And it took nearly twenty years more to learn how to make use of it.

"Now the Interstate Commerce Commission is in good working order. It has made rebating so difficult and dangerous as to be practically impossible. It exercises a vigilant government control over the railroads. By taking away monopoly's control of transportation it has gone a great way toward making monopoly impossible.

"As for the Bureau of Commerce and Labor, that has been, of course, but recently established, and it is already proving what a good thing it is, and how much it was needed.

"It gives the dealings of the trusts, of Big Business, all business, publicity. It makes things open. It keeps the eye of the government on business, gives the government the right to go over a corporation's books, to make whatever investigations it thinks proper.

"The existence of a Bureau of Commerce and Labor bring trade and industry as completely under the eye of the government as are the army and navy. The government can keep itself entirely informed, in detail, of the conditions and progress of industry in America.

"The orders, after prosecution under the Sherman law, for the dissolution of the Standard Oil Company and the Tobacco Trust, and the present suit against the United States Steel Corporation, show what is being done under the Sherman law.

"It was decided that the Standard Oil Company was operated in restraint of trade and in defiance of public welfare; that it made use of illegal means to gain control; that it destroyed competition. The Standard Oil Company was forced to dissolve.

"What was the Standard Oil is now sixty or seventy concerns. It may be that means are being found to get around the law, to disobey the order of dissolution. It may be that the sixty or seventy companies that once made up the Standard Oil are acting in collusion now, that they are once more working for special privilege. We don't know.

"But if that is the case such operations are no longer easy. They have become exceedingly difficult and exceedingly dangerous. They are practically certain to be discovered, and the men who are operating them, if any such schemes are in operation, are practically certain to go to jail.

"The Tobacco Trust has also been dissolved. The Tobacco Trust carried on a series of piratical operations scarcely equaled by the buccaneers of the high seas. The Tobacco Trust was composed of men who were greater brigands and pirates than the men who made up the Standard Oil Company—and that is saying a good deal.

"If the people who formed the Tobacco Trust are attempting to carry on their business in the old way, the same may be said of them as of the Standard Oil Company, in case they make any such effort. They will find it difficult and dangerous, and they will probably end in jail.

"As for the case against the Steel Trust, I cannot, of course, make any predictions now. It seems to me that the government has a case. I know that the Steel Trust made a concession to possible demands from the government two days before the suit for dissolution was filed. It looked a little as if it were trying to get in out of the rain, to run just in time.

"Many corporations have taken advantage of illegal control over transportation. Others have been protected by a tariff that made any foreign competition utterly impossible.

"There is nothing wrong, with a corporation as such. Corporations are not attacked because they are corporations. I personally think that a corporation that took no unrighteous advantage, that was perfectly above board, that kept completely within the law would be all right.

"But few corporations do that. Our corporations are acting against the law and against public good. They are not above board in their dealings. They act in restraint of trade."

"But how is it possible to determine what is in restraint of trade?" Miss Tarbell was asked. "Don't we need a more explicit definition of the provisions of the Sherman law?"

"Yes, we do," she replied decisively. "And we are getting it just as fast as we can.

"When that law was made it was utterly impossible for the Supreme Court, for Congress, for the President, for any one to sit down and cook up a definition of 'restraint of trade.' Nobody knew—nobody could know.

"That definition had to be worked out by experience, by tests. The Standard Oil Company was obviously acting in restraint of trade. It has been therefore specifically determined that the things that the Standard Oil Company did, against which decision was rendered, are in restraint of trade. If any corporation in the future is found to be doing what the Standard Oil did it will not be necessary for people to argue as to whether that is in restraint of trade. They will know that it is.

"The Tobacco Trust carried on a different set of operations. The same test was made. It is the same with the Steel Trust if decision is returned against it.

"We know now that certain things are in restraint of trade. As time goes on, as more suits are brought and more tests made the definition will become entirely specific.

"The men in the trusts claim that they cannot define the term because they do not know when they are disobeying the law.

"But they must have pretty strong suspicions, or else they wouldn't try to keep their manipulations and dealings secret. If they were not afraid that their operations were illegal they would not feel obliged to keep them so dark!"

IT is in destroying privilege and placing control over the "big interests" in the hands of the government that Miss Tarbell confesses most surely her faith in the national integrity and the national eagerness for fair play.

"Why is it that after a 'wave of reform' the people always swing back to the place where they started, always accept corruption again?" Miss Tarbell was questioned, and she smiled as she shook her head.

"That isn't true," she said. "They don't. There is a decided progress.

"Public affairs ebb and flow. But they gain a little every time. San Francisco, for instance, is immensely better than it was before its 'wave of reform.'

"The reason that so many reforms fail, or seem to fail, is that the bad interests are always at work and the good interests are not. The good people of a community are busy—busy attending to their own affairs, making their living. The bad people, the grafters, make their living by politics. They are busy watching for a chance to manipulate things their own way again.

"I believe thoroughly that the great mass of the American people are good, are honest, law seeking, eager to do away with privilege.

"But they are not always attentive.

"They are often under very stupid leadership. They want the good thing when they understand it, but it takes them a long time to understand. They have to be taught.

"It is one of the most hopeful signs of the present day that the people are becoming so wide awake, so interested, so quick to understand. They are waking up.

"Of course the good interests are not so busy, so concentrated, as the bad. We would have a better country if they were. But there's no use trying to say that they are. They are not.

"At the same time I believe that we have every reason to feel encouraged. It is an eternal fight. Nothing is as it ought to be. It always has been a fight and always will. But things are getting better. I haven't the slightest doubt of that.

"I believe, furthermore, that our courts are generally trustworthy. I know that I am making a statement to which many people will take exception, but it is my belief none the less. I know that the courts, like everything, must be watched. I realize that there is some corruption in the courts. There is some corruption everywhere. All men are human. The judges are not freed from temptation just by being judges.

"But I think that the American courts on the whole are pretty good, and I trust them. The courts haven't an easy time. They are necessarily conservative and nesessarily slow. Hearing all sides they have to be."

There was a mention of "one law for the rich and another for the poor," and Miss Tarbell smiled again and then sighed.

"It does look that way sometimes," she admitted. "And yet—I honestly don't think it is so bad as that.

"It is undoubtedly true that money helps to smooth the way. Money is an advantage in the eyes of the law.

"Things are uneven. But they are not always so bad as they look. The fact remains that we are improving.

"We have put several bankers in jail lately and several prominent railroad men. We have fined corporations and made two dissolve. We have filed suit against a third.

"And we can't get away from the fact that our big cities are full of poor burglars who have never seen the inside of a jail."

There is nothing of the "stump orator" about Miss Tarbell, no wild outcry that all things are incurably wrong or that all things are triumphantly right. Hers are no excitable assertions, no sentimental appeals, no bitterness of invective.

She states quite calmly that nothing in America is as it should be. As calmly she adds her conviction that the country is on the road to better things. She agitates no revolution. She advertises no panacea. She simply says, "These things, and these, and these are wrong. We see the first step toward setting them right. We must take it."

"Government control will not prove a wondrous cure-all," she repeated. "But when the Federal power can say—as I am sure it will be able to say in the near future—'This thing is wrong. It has got to stop,' we shall have gone a long way."

IN the more intimate personal questions of labor and capital Miss Tarbell sees much cause for encouragement. The relations of employer and workmen are not all that they should be, she admits—far from it.

"But we are able to see quite plainly what an immense improvement there has been, how things are marching on," she continued.

"In the safeguarding of the lives and the health of laboring people, in the procuring of sanitary labor conditions, in the regulation of hours and pay, in the recognition of employers' liability—in the entire sweep of labor conditions we are working toward better things.

"The Triangle Shirtwaist fire was a terrible thing, a horrible thing. But not many years ago in Rhode Island it was customary to shut up a thousand workers in a wooden building with barred windows and with no fire-escapes. The people were locked in. That would be utterly impossible now."

Closely bound up with every phase of the problem of "Big Business," in Miss Tarbell's opinion, is the war against poverty, against starvation.

"We must understand that all these things work out gradually," she said. "The distribution of wealth will mean of course the great lessening of poverty.

"And the world has always been fighting poverty. There are in the world to-day fewer starving people than there ever have been at any time since the beginning of history. At the same time it cannot be denied that there are millions upon millions of people who have not enough to eat, who are near to the starvation point.

"And the consideration of these people—of the hungry thousands, not only in America, but in India and China, all over the world—brings us to another step in the development of 'business.' It forces us to the realization that we must think of the whole world, not just of our own country.

"America is a rich nation, rich in money, in labor, in natural resources and in power. We have not known what to do with these things. Now we are finding out. They must be used for the benefit of the whole world. They are not just to pile up fortunes with."

Of her own part in the awakening of the nation to the fight against privilege Miss Tarbell speaks not at all.

"There has always been some one waking the people up," she said lightly, in response to a reference to the importance of her work. "Sometimes the people are being waked up to one thing, sometimes to another. Every one must do what he or she can, of course.

"It is the duty of every person who sees a wrong to expose it, make the people understand what the wrong is."

Miss Tarbell speaks very quietly as one who knows. Meeting her one's first impression is simply of a perfectly balanced investigator, who, having looked deeply and sanely into modern conditions, speaks with absolute authority. One forgets Miss Tarbell's actual power in the thought of her own personal fitness for it. "This is a woman who can do things," one reflects and then remembers that this is a woman by whom, constantly, things are being done.

As one goes on to talk with Miss Tarbell, listening to her quick, low voice, watching the play of expression in her gray eyes, one is struck by a curious resemblance to another woman who "works to make things better"—Jane Addams. There is not much likeness in the actual physical features of the two—the settlement worker and the exposer of business evils. But in expression, in the tones of her voice and her manner of speaking and even in her gestures, the woman who works to make America better by attacking the wrongs of wealth makes one think irresistibly of the woman who works to make America better by helping the wrongs of poverty.

Asked how she came to be a "muckraker" Miss Tarbell smiles and replies very simply that she was always interested in it.

"Journalism has always been my business," she said, "and it has made it possible for me to find things out and see where wrongs exist. I have never done daily journalistic work, but my magazine activity has combined the position of a writer with that of consulting editor, and I have had access to facts about business conditions.

"As I said, I think when a person sees what is wrong she ought to do what she can to right it.

"But I'm not the first muckraker, by any means," she smiled. "Muckraking is a very old profession. There have always been muckrakers. For instance, there was Voltaire. An excellent muckraker, Voltaire."

Her Attitude Severely Puzzled the Duke

REPRESENTATIVE HENRY of Texas, apropos of his campaign against international marriages, said the other day in Waco.

"How can anybody look on marriage in such an unmanly and such a mercenary way as does the foreign nobleman?

"A friend of mine, a diplomat, repeated to me a conversation he once heard in a St. James street club in London betwen an earl and a duke.

"The earl said to the duke:

"'Well, do you think Asa Golde's daughter, Lotta Golde, is going to buy you?'

"The duke smiled dubiously as he answered:

"'Sometimes I think she is, and then again, my boy, I think she's only shopping.'"

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In Their Accustomed Places.

HERE is a story which Baron Douse, the celebrated Irish judge, once told in that exaggerated Irish "brogue" which he loved to employ:

"I was down in Cork last month, holding assizes. On the first day, when the jury came in, the officer of the court said:

"'Gentlemen av the jury, ye'll take your accustomed places, if ye plaze.'

"'And may I never laugh,' said the Baron, "if they didn't all walk into the dock!'"

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A Solecism.

HARRY PAYNE WHITNEY was talking at a dinner at the St. Regis about London restaurants.

"They are very smart, smarter than ours," he admitted, "but they are too gloomy. Even at the after-theatre supper at the Savoy—that is the gayest and smartest restaurant scene in London—all those beautifully dressed men and women eat their delicate food and drink their vintage champagne with pompous, solemn looks, in a kind of Sunday, churchlike silence.

"One night at supper at the Savoy I said to my waiter:

"'I say, waiter, does any one ever laugh here?'

"'Well, sir,' the waiter answered, 'we do get an occasional complaint.'"